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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000949

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SUBJECT: THE SEA-MY SIDE OF THE SEA GAMES: HCMC CRACKS DOWN ON STREET PEOPLE

11. (SBU) Effective September 30, 2003, Ho Chi Minh City authorities will round up and classify all street persons living and working in public places around the city as part of a new program run by the HCMC Committee on Population, Family, and Children. Street children picked up under the program will be sent to state-run social care centers or orphanages, or returned to their home provinces. The program, which is similar to one announced for Hanoi, is part of a nationwide GVN effort to crack down on street people, beggars, and hustlers, all justified in the name of the upcoming Southeast Asia Games (SEA Games). Local street persons, however, appear largely unconcerned about the law or its effect on their lives.

12. (U) Local newspapers announced the passage of Decision 104/2003/QĐ-UB "on the management of street people who live by begging in public places" in mid-September, to take effect on September 30. According to Tuoi Tre ("Youth") newspaper, the program is intended to protect tourists and visitors attending December's SEA Games events from being hassled by beggars. The GVN has allocated 4.3 billion VND (approximately US\$275,000) to the plan, including re-settlement assistance and community advocacy programs. By the end of November 2003, the National Committee on Population Family and Children plans to have moved 100% of "begging and rubbish-collecting children" to social care centers and orphanages, and to have assisted in the voluntary return home of 70% of children who sell lottery tickets or postcards or who shine shoes.

13. (U) In November 2003, the program will also include an EU-funded 6.8 million Euro project to assist street children returned home in 36 districts. The children will receive funding for school and vocational training and receive job placement assistance. The project will also give no-interest loans to their families for household business development. The Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) has also submitted a 34 billion VND/year proposal to eliminate child beggars and rubbish collectors by 2006.

14. (SBU) MOLISA's Survey on Street Children in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, July-August 2003, reported that Vietnam has over 21,000 street children, mostly between 11-15, earning an average of 15,000-30,000 VND/day (\$1-2/day). The majority have not finished school, and 8% have never attended school. 54% of street children go home to families in the evening. A source at DOLISA (HCMC's MOLISA) indicated that street children who have a stable home, go to school, and who do not work too many hours may be allowed to continue their jobs.

15. (SBU) On September 23, 2003, Poloff interviewed affected street people in the main tourist district of HCMC. A 13-year-old boy selling lottery tickets and a 17-year-old shoeshine boy had both heard about the new regulations from local newspapers. The shoeshine boy also holds down a construction job three days each week, and has all the legal paperwork for the job. He did not expect trouble from the local authorities because of his other job and he expected to be able to continue his shoeshine work without interference. The lottery boy, however, was worried about whether he and his mother, who sells newspapers on a nearby street, would be able to continue working. He had yet to be approached by local authorities, but he has never been to school, so he falls in the main target group. He believes he would be able to run fast enough to avoid the police should they try to take him away.

16. (SBU) An elderly woman who sells lottery tickets from a wooden chair also expressed concerns about her livelihood. She reported that harassment had increased in the past few weeks and that she had to move her chair several times a day. She expects to have to stop working during the SEA Games because she is "old and cannot not run very fast" to escape from the police. After the SEA Games ended, however, she believes that she would be able to sell again.

17. (SBU) Ms. Ha (protect), a 14-year-old girl selling postcards in a major tourist square, had just been released from a social care center. (Note: Ms. Ha is well-known to the ConGen and has also appeared in tourist videos about Vietnam.) She had been picked up by police in July and placed in the SOS "orphanage" for three months. Her mother was able to secure her release after only 45 days, by paying a 3 million VND "fee" (approximately US\$200). Ms. Ha described the orphanage as something akin to a juvenile detention center, with bars on the windows, severely restricted movement, and regular beatings. She claimed to eat better on the street than in the orphanage. She has been selling postcards for 11 years, both with her mother and independently,

and speaks near-perfect English. She attends school for two hours each morning to learn "mathematics and history."

18. (SBU) Ms. Ha echoed earlier sentiments that she would "just outrun" the police. She reported that the police had started using plainclothes officers in the area, but that "everyone knows" who they were. Since her detention, Ms. Ha has refused to let ethnic Vietnamese take her picture, claiming "they" were using pictures to "make up stories." She still allows Westerners to take her photograph. Ms. Ha expressed no desire to change her lifestyle, saying that she liked the freedom and variety, and never wanted to go back to an orphanage again.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: This is not the first program NPFCC has proposed to address the problem of street children. Local press reported an almost identical proposal in April 2003, without the SEA Games linkage. That earlier measure, however, did not appear to get government support or funding until after it could be tied to the issue of "protecting tourists." Under the circumstances, this would appear to be an effort to advance a pre-existing agenda under cover of this major sporting event. DOLISA was originally willing to discuss this program, but later cancelled, saying they could not discuss things further without going through the local branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and having other representatives present at the meeting.

YAMAUCHI